

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 7, 2017

Agenda Item: Beckman Wildlife Management Area Farming Lease (R4)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to renew a farming lease with the Roe Ranch on 103 acres of the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This lease involves hay production on two alfalfa fields totaling 75 acres and the farming of 28 acres of small-grain food plots at 5 locations along the Judith River (see maps). Under terms of the lease, the lessee would be allowed to harvest one cutting of hay, after which he would be responsible for irrigating a subsequent hay crop, providing forage and cover for wildlife during late summer through winter. The food plots are primarily intended to benefit upland game birds through the winter. This lease agreement would continue the use of agricultural fields on the WMA for the mutual benefit of wildlife and an agricultural producer.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal on April 14, 2017 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P.M. on May 12, 2017. Copies of the Draft EA were distributed to neighboring landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was also available for public review on FWP's web site. FWP received zero comments.

Alternatives and Analysis

Under the No Action alternative, the agricultural lease would not be renewed and haying or farming of small food plots would no longer occur on the Beckman WMA. The existing alfalfa fields and small-grain crops would desiccate, with some becoming unpalatable for wildlife. Weeds would also establish. With agricultural practices continuing on surrounding private lands, game species could increase use of adjacent private land, reducing hunting opportunity on the Beckman WMA and potentially increasing game damage problems. An existing, traditional agricultural use of these 103 acres would discontinue, with attendant loss to the agricultural and wildlife productivity in the area.

Under the Proposed Alternative, alfalfa and small-grain food plots would continue to be farmed on 103 acres of the Beckman WMA for six years, for the mutual benefit of the lessee, FWP, and wildlife. The agricultural fields would be maintained and managed to prevent the growth and spread of noxious weeds at no cost or labor to FWP. All other costs and maintenance as a result of this lease would be the responsibility of the lessee.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the Commission give final approval for renewing the Beckman WMA-Roe Ranch cooperative farming agreement. The renewal reflects a continuation of past practices and ongoing habitat enhancement on the WMA.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve renewal of the Beckman Wildlife Management Area-Roe Ranch cooperative farming agreement for six years, beginning with the 2018 growing season.